

PULLING APART, COMING TOGETHER

★★★★FRIENDLY WITNESS

Directed by Warren Sonbert.

By Fred Camper

Early in Warren Sonbert's new 32-minute film, *Friendly Witness*, there is a shot of a tug-of-war game. The camera moves along the rope from one group to its opponent, each pulling against the other, neither winning. In a film in which most shots last only a few seconds, this is a relatively long take. After I'd seen the film several times, I understood why this particular game is, in its way, a metaphor for the film as a whole.

The first thing one notices about *Friendly Witness* is that not only is there no dramatic narrative, but there is no continuity in space or time. Sonbert cuts effortlessly across several continents and several decades, juxtaposing footage of parades, circuses, cathedrals, cities, natural settings, couples, people alone. If there is one central principle operating in his editing, it is that each cut pulls the viewer away from an image just when one is becoming most involved with it. Since the image that follows is almost invariably very different, one feels the film as a perpetual pulling away or tearing apart. That Sonbert is quite conscious of this is apparent in his remarks to an interviewer: "My cuts are almost like slaps in the face—you get one reality, but then, no, this next scene cancels it, trumps it, by another kind of reality . . . yanking you away from it before you can actually be satisfied."

Sonbert began making films as a teenager in the 1960s. His early films—the third of which, *Hall of Mirrors*, will be shown this Sunday with *Friendly Witness* at Chicago Filmmakers—were mostly edited-in-camera portraits of his friends and acquaintances, with rock songs on the sound track. The interaction of his spontaneous, energetic filming and the driving beat of the songs produced films with almost ecstatic rhythms. In about 1970 he abandoned sound filmmaking and produced a series of extraordinary silent films, beginning with *Carriage Trade* (1971). These films are all edited with great care, and the absence of sound allows the filmmaker to concentrate on rhythms derived solely from the imagery. In *Friendly Witness*, however, sound once again returns, in the form of four rock oldies (including "Runaway" and "Will You Love Me Tomorrow?"), followed by Gluck's overture to *Iphigenie en Aulide*, heard in two different performances. The contrast between rock and classical music helps divide the film into two sections.

While some critics have referred to the first section as a group of music videos, this seems an unhelpful comparison. In contrast to his earlier sound films, *Friendly Witness* is obviously edited in relation to the music. But the editing never becomes a

slave to the music's beat, and the images never become illustrations for the words of the songs. Instead the relationship between image and music, particularly in the rock section, is not unlike the relationships Sonbert creates between images. At times the words of the songs seem to relate directly to the images we see (we hear "my little runaway" while seeing a motorcycle jumper); at other times words and images seem to be working almost at cross-purposes or relating only ironically. Similarly, at times the image rhythm and music rhythm appear to dance together, while at others they go their separate ways.

What makes *Friendly Witness* such a rich masterpiece, and multiple viewings so rewarding (at Sunday's screening this film will be screened a second time if audience members request it), is that its whole structure is based not on a single organizational principle but on many, some of them almost contradictory. Some films are organized primarily as a series of metaphors, or by connecting images more abstractly through common shapes or movements, or

by using images for their narrative possibilities—but Sonbert uses all these methods and more. He thus produces a cinema of multiple attractions based on dissonance as well as rhyme, fissure as well as connection, irony as well as rapture.

Though Sonbert's film is based on multiple relations between its parts, that is not to say the individual parts are not important. Indeed, it is the intensely sensual, dazzlingly seductive quality of his images that allows the film to get off the ground. It is only because his images—the rich colors, the frequently balletic movements of the subjects or camera, and the often spectacular subjects—are so enthralling that his cutting away from a shot just at the moment it seems to have attained its maximum interest is so powerful. Sonbert is that rare personal filmmaker who derives as much of his inspiration from past Hollywood masterpieces as from his fellow avant-gardists. And to good ends—he imparts to the colors and surfaces of the objects he films some of the tactile sensuality of a Minnelli or a Cukor; his colors can include the strong clash-

es of a Sirk.

But sensuality for Sonbert is also something dangerous, not to be trusted—it can betray even while it seduces. In an image that appears twice, once in each section, we see a view from a Chicago el train in the Loop that's approaching a grade crossing. Our view through the front window carries us forward into the image with the train, and just as we think we are about to cross the perpendicular track, the train veers off to the right. At this point Sonbert cuts away. To continue with the train image would be to suggest that the image is a world that can be entered into and lived in. Instead, at the point of the viewer's maximum attention and pleasure but before any real involvement can develop, he moves on to another

continued on page 33



Film Ratings

- ★★★★ = Masterpiece
- ★★★ = A must-see
- ★★ = Worth seeing
- ★ = Has redeeming facet
- = Worthless

FRIENDLY WITNESS

continued from page 12

image; thus the train's veering can be seen as a metaphor, within a single shot, for the consciousness of the film as a whole.

Yet Sonbert's editing works to combine shots into larger entities as often as the shots seem to pull apart from each other. Images are combined based on common subject matter (couples in love), common shape or movement, or common theme. In a short "grandeur" sequence we go from the Golden Gate Bridge to a rodeo to a vast canyon to a trapeze act; all these images span large spaces. Most frequently Sonbert will connect images based on common themes or movements, as when a cat's playful paw movements become a motorcycle jump. Often shots with strong similarities of shape and subject are placed near each other but separated by several intervening shots, so that the comparison is not too obvious. Thus we see children playing on a revolving playground toy followed by a woman examining a strip of cloth and a city view

with a rainbow; only then do we arrive at a shot of other children viewing a circular wheel of fortune at a fairground.

Sonbert also makes connections based not on obvious similarities of shape or movement but on the meaning of the objects depicted. In a silent section between two songs we see a jet engine filmed from the plane window in an image rich with blue sky. Fireworks appear over it in superimposition, until the engine fades out and we see fireworks at night. The two juxtaposed images are completely different to look at—engine and blue sky versus points of light against darkness. But the connection is between the fireworks we can see and the multiple fiery explosions we cannot see but know are occurring inside the engine.

The dual nature of this last juxtaposition—the two shots contain fires, but they are opposites in appearance—is a key to understanding the film as a whole. While constantly shifting the kinds of compositions he is making, Sonbert retains a mixture of comparison and contrast throughout the work. At every cut, the shots being compared are in some ways similar and in other ways opposites; within every shot there is a seductive pull inward and a deflecting turn elsewhere. A similar dualism can be found in the film's two-section form.

In the second section the images, while still of fairly brief duration, last a bit longer than in the first. There are still strong editing contrasts, but there is also more of a willingness to stay with each image, finding in them some of the dualism and mystery achieved through editing. The film seems more content to dwell in single spaces, both literally and figuratively. In the first section the viewer is dazzled with multiple possibilities. A series of sensuously spectacular images appear like a series of tiny explosions; when each explosion occurs, we immediately move on to a different one. The second section is not without its sensual bursts, but it is nonetheless quieter, more inward.

The first section also consists mostly of footage filmed in the 60s and early 70s; those who know Sonbert's early films will recognize imagery from them. The second section has more newer footage mixed in with older shots. While the contrast between sections is interesting in itself as a contrast between two states of mind, a few basic facts about the filmmaker reveal that the film also has an autobiographical dimension. During the 60s and early 70s Sonbert had multiple partners; from 1978 to the present he has been monogamous with a single lover. This interpretation is clinched by the fact that this lover appears

in a single shot in the film in which Sonbert is seen playing with a cat—at the exact dividing point between the two sections.

Biographical interpretation of art has long had a justly deserved bad reputation, because it has too often been used as a substitute for real viewing, as a way of pigeonholing a work and explaining away its complexities. Information about Sonbert's lovers is hardly necessary to appreciate or understand his film. But that information expanded and enriched my view of it, by adding a directly human dimension to its form.

In any event, *Friendly Witness* would be particularly hard to reduce to a single interpretation. It is to the film's great credit that with repeated viewings the contrast between the two sections seems to grow less strong; one comes to see the meditative aspects of the first and the polymorphous elements in the second—but then monogamy doesn't prevent multiple attractions. While the two sections might at first have seemed like two poles, it is soon apparent that each also contains its opposite—that at every moment of the work we are being spun about and shown the reverse as well. The engaged viewer is a continuing participant in a dance that alternates between solo and duet, identity and alienation, enthrallment and ironic distance.